

## **Horned Larks--a bright spot in winter fields**

**By Lauren Shaffer**

Fall migration may be just about over, but there are still some fascinating birds to observe. One species, the Horned Lark, is found over most of North America from the ocean to the highest mountain, and yet most people have never noticed them. They are gregarious birds and are usually found in flocks, or with at least a few birds.

Although Horned Larks are present year-round, they are more easily visible in the winter when the farmers' fields are bare. Take a drive on some back roads where there is room to pull over next to a field that may have grown corn the previous summer and listen for a high-pitched tinkling sound as a flock of sparrow-sized birds fly over. When they land, they are so well-camouflaged that they become difficult to see, but with binoculars their beautiful field marks become visible. Look for grayish-brown birds with a dark cap, black mask, and collar. The males have varying amounts of yellow on their faces and two feathery "horns" which can lay down or stand up, making for a very unusual sight!

When the ground is covered with snow and the roads have been plowed, these birds can be found along the roadsides. The scraped-up edges of the road have a few seeds that the birds can feed on. When a car spooks the birds they often come back to the same place to begin feeding again. I often use my car as a bird blind creeping up as close as possible to get photos before they fly away. If you are lucky, you may find a few Snow Buntings, mostly white birds with light brown patches, mixed in with the Horned Larks. They remind me of snowflakes when they fly up and drift back down to the snow. Another unusual bird from the north which may forage among the larks is the Lapland Longspur which looks much like a sparrow.

Other methods of feeding when the ground is covered with snow involve jumping up to pluck seeds from weeds or digging up kernels of corn from the field. Where Amish horses have traveled the roads or manure has been spread in fields, seeds may be found in the manure. The birds are opportunistic and will not starve in winter. They find plenty to eat, even though it may not be pleasant to watch them foraging in fresh manure. In summer they will feed on insects as well as seeds.

This bird is North America's only true lark, and it is also one of its earliest nesters. It begins in late winter, singing its tinkling song as it flies above fields that have little to no vegetation, announcing its territory to others. The female scrapes out a depression in the bare earth for its nest and then does a very odd thing among ground nesters. It puts "pavings" around the nest, using clods of earth, corn stalk, or cow dung. One theory is that the Horned Lark is attempting to disguise the dirt which was dug up and flung aside in making the depression for the nest. Grasses and shredded corn stalks are then woven into the tiny nest, along with feathers and other fine materials.

To find Horned Larks in your area, use <https://ebird.org/map>, or the free Audubon App which also has a search species feature. Recent sightings in your area will then show up which will help in your search for these unique birds. In summer watch for Bobolinks and Meadowlarks in the same habitat, and in winter keep your eyes open for Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs. Horned Larks are a common species in farming

habitat that few people have noticed. I'm so glad to have had the opportunity to introduce this very cool bird to many who may have never known about it. See <http://www.birdingpictures.com/horned-larks-snow-buntings-lapland-longspurs/> for more photos and content about this interesting bird.

Photos by the Author

